Reconsidering X of Y Constructions: Evidence From Scotland

Alison Burns

DOI: 10.2436/15.8040.01.107

Abstract

A study of place-names in Belhelvie, Aberdeenshire has shown that there is a large proportion of x of y constructions: 39 out of a corpus of 253 names. This name type is of significance because "its distinctive word order raises questions about language contact and the influence of languages upon each other" (Cox 2007:13). It is generally accepted that in the North-East of Scotland, the provenance of x of y constructions is the result of language contact between Gaelic and Scots (Nicolaisen 1959, 1960, Cox 2007). Nicolaisen said "it can be stated with a good deal of confidence that the majority of these names on the Scottish mainland is probably due to direct translation from the original Gaelic" (Nicolaisen 1960:202). Yet the evidence from Belhelvie suggests that this name type emerged through independent genesis, a theory supported by evidence from Scandinavia. This paper aims to discuss both new evidence from Belhelvie and existing evidence from other parts of the world in order to argue that in the case of Aberdeenshire, x of y constructions should be reconsidered.

*****

Paper

This paper concerns X of Y constructions in Scotland. The existing scholarship on the subject will be discussed, followed by details of my own corpus of names and finally the reasons why I think this name type should be reconsidered, at least in Scotland.

An x of y construction is a name which follows the pattern *generic + of + specific*. These names are interesting because they do not follow the expected pattern of Germanic syntax which is *qualifier + headword.* For example, names such as *Strathburn* follow the expected pattern, whereas names such as Bridge of Don and Water of Leith do not.

This distinctive word order raises questions about language contact; the "distinctive word order raises questions about language contact and the influence of languages upon each other" (Cox 2007:12).

There are a number of theories about x of y constructions all over the world; however this paper focuses on the Scottish examples.

Nicolaisen's work (1957, 1959, 2001) has shown that there are a high number of x of y constructions clustered in certain areas of Scotland. These are the Northern Isles, Caithness, the North-East and to a lesser extent the south-west of Scotland.

It has generally been accepted in these areas that the provenance of x of y constructions is the result of language contact when one language was gradually replaced by Scots (Nicolaisen 1959, 1960; Cox 2007).

Nicolaisen argues for a Gaelic model stating that x of y constructions came into being when English-speaking Scots translated Gaelic names in which the generic element usually precedes the qualifying element.

Cox (2007) has argued that the names should be reconsidered in light of evidence from the northern isles and the far north of Scotland which suggests an underlying Scandinavian model. Alternatively.

Sandnes (1997) proposes a French model. Land ownership documents are used to show early French spellings which could have been translated to give an x of y construction.
However, this paper concentrates on evidence from the North-East of Scotland.

In the North-East, Nicolaisen suggests that such names "came into being imitating a Gaelic word order pattern" (Nicolaisen 1959: 100). He says that "it can be stated with a good

deal of confidence that the majority of these names on the Scottish mainland is probably due to direct translation from the original Gaelic" (Nicolaisen 2001: 81).

Cox (2007) acknowledges that a Gaelic model in the North-East is plausible but argues that the pattern may be Scandinavian.

It is also accepted that in chronological terms, the earliest x of y names are Burn of X names (Nicolaisen 2001) followed later by others such as Water of X, Mains of X and Bridge of X.

My own research involved conducting a place-name survey of the parish of Belhelvie which is a coastal parish in Aberdeenshire. The major names taken from the Ordnance Survey Explorer Map (2007, 1:25000) were used to form the original corpus. This was the most modern large scale map available.

This map gave me a corpus of two-hundred-and-fifty-three major names in the parish. These names were then supplemented with early spellings from earlier maps and historic documents such as Retours, Register of Sasines, Roy's Map and others.

In the Belhelvie data thirty-seven names are x of y constructions. A further two names are regarded as x of y constructions in the early spellings. This accounts for sixteen- per cent of the corpus.

As I will be comparing my own corpus to Nicolaisen's corpus it is useful at this point to compare their differences. Nicolaisen used the Ordnance Survey One inch map of the whole of Scotland. My corpus uses the 1:25000 Ordnance Survey map of Belhelvie parish. Nicolaisen had an overall corpus of over 600 names compared to my own substantially smaller 253 names.

One of the interesting features of the x of y constructions in Belhelvie is that 100% of the time the specifier is 'a name from a name'. For example, there is a place called Kier in the parish and also a Hill of Kier. The same with Ardo; Hill of Ardo, Mains of Ardo, etcetera. The thirty-seven x of y constructions are named from only eighteen existing place-names which are also found in the parish.

Nicolaisen also noted this in his x of y corpus. He said that most of the *Burn of x* names contains the name of a human settlement, with only 1.15% of his corpus referring to characteristics of the watercourse themselves. This led him to state that this "preponderance of names from names, and of defining elements describing surroundings of the named water course suggests that this is a fairly recent innovation" (Nicolaisen 1959:94). He defines the name type as a "fairly recent Anglo-Scottish creation" (Nicolaisen 1959:94).

However, my own corpus also contains far more variation in the generic elements than Nicolaisen's. There are no examples of the so called earliest *Burn of x* names in Belhelvie. The closest example is *Burnside of x*, for which there is only one example; Burnside of Whitecairns. The most frequent generic is *Mains of x* accounting for 21.6% of the examples, followed by *Hill of X* and *Hillhead of X* both accounting for 13% of the examples and *Mill of X* and *Newton of X* each accounting for 10.8%. The remaining eleven generics only appear once.

The generic elements lead on to the dating of the names.

Although x of y constructions have been billed as 'a fairly recent Anglo-Scottish creation' the Belhelvie examples appear to be far later than suggested.

The largest proportion of generic elements in the Belhelvie corpus is *Mains of x*. Nicolaisen found almost 300 *Mains of X* names in his corpus. He noted that the vast majority of the *Mains of X* names are concentrated in the East and North-East from Fife to Ross and Cromarty. He states that "it is difficult to point to an underlying Gaelic model for the type Mains of X. It rather looks as if the type of name in which the preposition of links the generic and specific elements, had already been established in Scots as a pattern when the social and agricultural situation demanded that the concept and reality of the 'home farm' had to find

linguistic expression, in order to distinguish it from the 'big house' itself or from the Cotton or Newton bearing the same name" (Nicolaisen 2001:81).

Sandnes also has her own theory about the Mains of X group. She states that "the oldest examples of x of y constructions relate to high-status farms, whose upper class owners did not speak Gaelic, but were likely to speak French" (Sandnes 1997:127). She also provides early spellings which show a French form that could have served as a pattern for the x of y construction. She says that "we may thus assume that the x of y construction depends on a French pattern rather than a Gaelic one, and that the usage started in the upper class. The fact that Mains of X (about the home farm of an estate) is found in a wider area of mainland Scotland than the other x of y constructions Nicolaisen discusses may support this theory" (Sandnes 1997:127).

Yet the Belhelvie corpus shows that the generic *Home Farm of X* is an acceptable form in its own right. This is apparent from the name Home Farm of Potterton. Nicolaisen argues that although *Mains of X* belongs to the post-Gaelic period, the distribution of the category does not clash with distribution of X of Y names and therefore although not directly linked with Gaelic the name type still conforms to the theory that Gaelic was translated into Scots giving rise to the unusual construction.

However, the *Mains of X* names in Belhelvie suggest that more work should be done on this type of place-name as the early spellings pattern with neither Sandnes's nor Nicolaisen's theories.

Indeed, all the X of Y names in the Belhelvie corpus suggest a much later date of around the eighteenth and nineteenth century rather than the thirteenth century, with most appearing first on the Ordnance Survey 1870 map and some only appearing on the later Ordnance Survey Explorer Map 2007.

It is of course possible that the names simply do not appear in any documents or on maps and that they could well be older than the spellings show. Yet many of the names still point to modern origins and appear as an x of y construction in relatively recent times.

This is apparent when considering Millton of Potterton. The earliest spelling for this name is 1747 where it appears as Pottertonmill. The name does not appear again until the 2007 Explorer Map and is now shown as Millton of Potterton. This suggests that X of Y constructions are being favoured in the modern onomasticon.

Again this can be seen with *Leyton*. *Leyton* appears in the early spellings as Lyntoun (1618) and Leytoun *(*1622) before becoming an X of Y construction; Layton of Meny in 1747. By 1823 this name has reverted back to its original form Leyton, but again the dates suggest that X of Y constructions were being favoured in the mid eighteenth century.

The most recent names, those only appearing on the OS explorer map 2007 include Burnside of Whitecairns, Dams of Craigie Farm, Hill of Kier Croft, Moss-side of Millden, Newton of Ardo and Newton of Menie. Two are the names of farms and crofts and therefore may not have featured on previous Ordnance Survey maps. However, three of the remaining four contain the generic *Newton*. The generic gives us a clue about the date of these names – these places all denote 'new settlements'. The specific elements are all existing place names in the parish.

Therefore, in Belhelvie at least it seems that X of Y constructions represent a modern name type that is still in use at the present time. It is possible that the X of Y construction entered the onomasticon as a result of language contact with Gaelic, but there is no evidence from Belhelvie to prove it. Indeed the differences could perhaps simply come down to the fact that Nicolaisen's corpus originated from broader maps of the whole of Scotland, whereas my own corpus uses a map with a larger scale. Yet I believe that minor names are just as important and that more detailed analysis of them can provide clues about X of Y constructions in general.

Therefore evidence from a field-name survey, again the North-East of Scotland will be discussed. The nature of the data collection means it is not always possible to interview farmers in Belhelvie parish so some of the data is from a larger area within the North-East.

All of the names were collected through oral interviews with the farmers and therefore there are only a few occasions where earlier spellings can be found. Nevertheless, some of the farmers did produce modest archives of old farming diaries and maps.

The x of y constructions in the field-name corpus include Crossland of Wattison Bank and Morgan Braes of Kipsie on Castleton Farm, Moss of Barra and Newton of Old Meldrum on Ardfork Farm and Newton of Tulloch and Mains of Tulloch on South Byebush, to name but a few. Moss of Barra is an old spelling from a 1710 farm map and in present day use is *Barra Moss*. This example again shows that x of y constructions seem to have been popular in the 18th century. Earlier spellings are not available so it is difficult to tell if this was in fact the original name. Many of the other names have been named from the areas which surround them, for example Newton of Tulloch is the field nearest to the place Newton of Tulloch so perhaps it is not necessary to examine the major name as well as duplicates in the minor names.

Field names also question how names are used. It is difficult to ascribe dates to field-names because of the lack of written records that include them. They survive in Scotland primarily as an oral record and my research has shown that they are highly susceptible to change.

Another important point to make about field-names is that my interviews have shown that when a name is no longer relevant the farmer tends to change it. An example of this is a number of *Cornyard Parks* have been changed to things like *Front of House* and *Front of Stables* because the old system of using corn stacks to store grain is no longer used.

So at this stage I would argue that at least some of the x of y constructions found in field names being relatively new names formed within living memory of the farmer. Therefore, I think the field-name evidence will also support a later phase of x of y naming in the North-East.

I also believe that field names could help to resolve a mysterious blank zone in the North-East. Nicolaisen (1959: 95) notes that between the River Dee and the River Ythan, particularly in the Don Valley there are no x of y constructions on the map. He questions whether this points to a different period of linguistic Scotticisation in this area. I have not yet managed to cover field-names in this area but believe that such minor names could be of use in determining whether this really is a blank zone or whether x of y constructions are just not represented in the major names.

Conclusion

As I have shown, my data from Belhelvie parish and the field-names from the North-East suggest that x of y constructions in this area are a recent phenomenon and that this construction is still being used in name production today.

That is not to say that the constructions did not emerge as a result of language contact as Cox, Nicolaisen and Sandnes suggest but I believe more work is required in this area of onomastics. Comparing the results from Nicolaisen's corpus and my own also shows that the scale of the map used in the research can yield totally different results. Therefore, in order to come up with a sound explanation I think that minor names as well as major names should be included in future research.

Bibliography

Cox, R. 2007. The Norse Element in Scottish Place-names: syntax as a chronological marker. Journal of Scottish Name Studies 1, 13-26.

Nicolaisen, W.F.H. 1957. The Semantic Structure of Scottish Hydronymy. Scottish Studies 1, 211-240.

Nicolaisen, W.F.H. 1959. Notes on Scottish Place-Names. Scottish Studies 3, 88-102.
Nicolaisen, W.F.H. 2001. Scottish place-names: their study and significance. London: Batsford.(First published 1976).
Sandnes, B. 1997. The Bu of Orphir, Burn of Gueth- A Gaelic Pattern in Orkney Place-Names? Northern Studies 32, 125-128.

Alison Burns
School of Critical Studies
University of Glasgow
a.burns.2@research.gla.ac.uk